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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the leadership role of the elementary principal through an examination of the dynamics of the leadership-followership phenomenon. Several research studies are cited which give support to the point of view that leadership characteristics of a group are invested in the followership. A person may lead, but to be followed, the leader must accept, or seem to accept, the tradition, norms, and goals of the group and assist the group in achieving the purpose the group has identified. Compatibility between the principal and the teachers in terms of close agreement of educational philosophy would appear to be necessary conditions so that a principal might function effectively. Computer matching is suggested as a vehicle for achieving the needed conditions for fostering educational change through the leadership of the principal. (Author)

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The Change Agent Role of the Elementary Principal Reexamined

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The tenure of our times holds that we should be change-oriented, that as new knowledge unfolds, security can be found by embracing the concept of constant and rapid change. Cultural changes have and will cast a directional image for American education to evolve the specifics for societal-dictated changes. Witness the educational changes in the past decade which have consumed the mental energies and financial support of both private and public institutions. These might be grouped under three headings: the application of technology to education, concern with organization, and a revived interest in the disciplines.

Efforts to apply technology to education have produced educational television, language laboratories, programmed instruction, and the use of machines of all kinds. The intense and continuing interest in new organizational patterns has developed such innovations as the nongraded school, team teaching, flexible scheduling, the middle school plan, the open school, increased course requirements within existing structures, and many others. The revived interest in the disciplines, partly due to the rapid advancement of knowledge, and partly due to the efforts of specialists who have been encouraged by federal grants for their work, has produced remarkable innovative school practices in such fields as sciences, mathematics, and foreign language.

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Despite these efforts and their wide publication, the application of innovations in many American classrooms has come all so slow. Instructional practices in many classrooms are unchanged from those of 30 years ago. A number of endeavors financed by federal money and some through private foundations are attempting to design a bridge capable of spanning the gulf between basic innovation and its application or dissemination in the public schools.

THE PRINCIPAL AS CHANGE AGENT

Consensus comes from a number of sources that one of the most important roles of the principal is that as an agent for change. Trump¹ states, "The principal's major responsibility is to work with teachers to improve instructional materials." A publication of the American Association of School Administrators² describes this function of the principal as follows:

Of late, considerable emphasis has been placed upon the principal as a change agent because of the notion that the essential task of administration is to cope with innovation. The principal is one of the administrative agents through which change enters the school and, in turn, must live with the environment set in turbulent motion. As an instrument for innovation, the principal contributes his part to the dynamic development of education in a social institution and prevents deterioration through stagnation.

This publication echoes an approach to the selection of the principal which has long appeared in writings in educational administration. It reaffirms the common practice for selection of the principal which gives primary consideration to the personal characteristics of the individual, including sex, marital status, intelligence, health, personality, and value patterns. The utilization of rating scales, tests, and interviews, together with a look at the nature of the position

itself, is also recommended.

These considerations, as important as they appear, are not enough! The membership characteristics of the followers deserve equal attention as those of the prospective leader, unless one subscribes to the "great man" conception of leadership. The "great man" conception of leadership affirms that the leader can impose his wishes upon the group by exercising the power of his office. A problem of great interest and importance is the degree to which a leader can influence the norms of an established group. It appears that one may lead, but to be followed, the leader must accept or seem to accept the traditions, norms, and goals of the group and assist the group in achieving the purpose the group has identified.

Thus, it can be discerned that effective leadership does not reside entirely within the leader himself, but also within the sociological milieu created by the followers and the situation with which he is confronted.

LEADERSHIP, SOME FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH

A number of studies of successful leaders suggest that the leader shares certain characteristics with members of the group. He is perceived by the followers as "one of us" and not as an "outsider."

An early study by Brown³ stressed the point that the successful leader must have membership-character in the group he is attempting to lead. Membership characteristic in the social-psychological sense means that the individual has the pattern of attitudes and reaction tendencies common to the group.

The leader, in addition to membership-character, must also be

seen to incorporate to a special degree the norms and values which are central to the group. This is demonstrated in a study by Bredemeier and others.⁴ This generalization was subjected to several empirical tests in attempting to determine leaders among farmers and the high and low adoption of practices recommended by government agencies. Marsh and Coleman⁵ found that leaders identified by the high adoption group were innovators. The low adoption group identified leaders which tended to be conservative.

Farm leaders, like other leaders, conform to the values and norms of their groups. If farmers value change, their leaders will be "social changers"; if farmers do not value change, their leaders will cling to old ways and resist changes.

Another consideration is that the leader must be perceived, not only as like "most of us," but also as the "best of us." A study by Jenkins⁶ among military groups indicated that leaders were superior to the rest of the group members in those abilities which were relevant to the group task. An early study by Hollingworth⁷ concluded that the leader must not be too much of "the best of us." She found that a discrepancy of more than thirty I.Q. points between the leader and the led resulted in a leader-follower relation which either did not develop or disintegrated quickly. The "too intelligent" leader may not be perceived as "one of us"; he may be attempting to introduce innovations the group is not ready to accept; problems in communication may arise because of the intelligence discrepancy; and finally his interests may be remote from problems of the group so that he is not motivated to help the group.

Although these leadership studies are outside of the area of education, they do offer suitable rationale for understanding the nature of leadership - followership relations inherent in the operation of public schools.

IDENTIFYING COMBATABILITY FACTORS IN THE TEACHER-PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIP

Findings from research studies of leadership can be utilized to minimize the factors which act as deterrents to the functioning of the school principal in his role as the educational leader and change agent. Combatability factors in the teacher-principal relationship must be identified, first, however. A study by Gross and Herriott⁸ established at a statistically significant level of validity that teacher resistance to the principal's leadership was more than a theoretical assumption. Efforts which seek to accelerate the adoption of innovative educational practices by classroom teachers must recognize this condition and suggest designs or practices which are aimed towards the reduction of teacher resistance.

Increased teacher militancy has produced a number of agreements which have resulted in a strengthening of the teacher's position and a diminishing of the authority of the principal. Some time ago, Cunningham⁹ predicted that current teacher militancy would spread in the years ahead. He stated, "We can expect even greater press for participation in more and more areas of educational decision from teachers, as well as from other professional groups." The great number of teacher strikes in the past two years alone, give credence to the accuracy of this prediction.

Another factor which has altered the teacher-principal relationship significantly has been the sharp increase in the numbers of teachers who are working towards or who possess graduate degrees. The principal, in many cases, is not educated at a level which is higher than that of the teachers. This, too, lessens the influence of the principal as an educational leader and change agent. Teachers tend to turn to fellow teachers for advice and help because of the non-threatening nature of such a relationship.

The dual and somewhat antithetical roles which the principal must play tend to hinder his fulfillment as educational leader. Hemphill¹⁰ long ago identified two conflicting factors in leadership behavior--"initiating structure" and "consideration." Displaying leadership in the "achievement" sense (attaining, directing) and at the same time maintaining an adequate "process" of achievement (sound interpersonal relations, good morale, and the like) are conflicting factors inherent in the leadership role. Can a principal exercising the leadership position function effectively as an evaluative and a supportive person simultaneously?

Although no answers to this question are readily available, recognition must be made of this condition which makes the leadership function of the principal far from simplistic.

MINIMIZING RESISTIVE FACTORS THROUGH COMPUTER MATCHING

The assignment of teachers and principals through the random patterning prevalent in most public school systems fails to recognize the importance of leader-follower compatibility necessary for effecting

innovative educational practices.

Gross and Herriott¹¹ stated:

If principals must work with newly appointed teachers whose educational beliefs are contrary to their own, or those of others on the staff, or whose personal characteristics hamper cooperation, strain and tension may ensue between principals and the teachers, which may erode the principal's professional leadership.

The same investigators found that those principals who participated in the evaluation of applicants for positions as teacher in their own schools demonstrated a considerably higher degree of professional leadership. Yet, in large school districts, it is almost a functional impossibility for each principal to personally select new staff members. School districts which recruit teachers in large numbers must depend upon personnel specialists to insure that vacant positions are filled. How then, can the important factor of leader-follower compatibility be realized?

Assuming the careful screening of people selected to operate in the role of principal so that these individuals possess those personal and professional assets which would seem to be necessary for effective leadership functioning, the remaining task would appear to be the matching of teachers with principals of a similar educational outlook.

The use of the high-speed computer with its electronic memory system would appear to be an efficient vehicle for the matching of principals and teachers. Computers have been used to match compatible couples for dating or marriage. Operation MATCH, managed by the NEA, has successfully matched available teachers with available teaching positions. Lesser known, perhaps, but with over a decade of success, has been the National Intern Matching Program in which physicians about to begin their internship are matched with eligible hospitals.

An instrument for principals and teachers would need to be developed which would elicit responses to statements dealing with the operational educational philosophy of each individual. Items should cover such topics as perceptions regarding role identification of teacher and principal, participation of teachers in decision-making, the bureaucratic relationship of principals and teachers, views on discipline, supervision, parent-school relations, curriculum, change and innovation, the managerial and social support by the principal, and others.

Responses to items contained in the instrument could be put on data cards so that computer matching of teachers with principals for educational compatability could be accomplished. This approach would appear to be most easily applied in the selections of the administrative and teaching staff for a new school. Its application over a period of time in any school situation, however, would tend to foster the establishment of conditions under which a principal might become an effective change agent.

The utilization of computer matching would tend to eliminate the "chance" compatibility considerations of the school assignment of both teachers and principals. Incompatability factors of the leader and the followers would not necessarily be eliminated, but minimized.

Computer matching is a rapid, highly usable, and highly effective approach of our time. Its application in education to promote a faster rate of educational innovation should not be ignored.

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¹¹Gross and Herriott.